



## If stones could only speak

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# Heritage Newsletter



Issue 26

## **"If stones could only speak" by Dr Peter Wilson**

Situated on rising ground to the south of Portrush are two solitary but prominent upright pieces of basalt that archaeologists consider to be standing stones and thus of some antiquity. Such stones are part of the suite of features generally known as megaliths. They may occur singly (as in the Portrush examples) or as components of stone circles or stone rows, the latter also known as alignments. The purpose of standing stones has probably been debated for as long as they have been recognised as being ancient. And even today we cannot be certain as to their original function, or if that function changed through time.

Brief details of stone characteristics and locations are provided by the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

### **The White Wife or Cloghagalla (SMR code – LDY-003-011)**

This stone, in the townland of Carnalridge, is approximately 1.65 m high and at 40 m above sea level. It is 2.2 km south-southwest from the centre of Portrush and is visible from across a wide area of the local landscape. A broad sweep of the coast can be seen from the stone.



**View cross Portrush from the White Wife.**



Two stones make up the monument – a small roundish boulder rests on top of a larger stone that tapers from its base to top. The stones are now cemented together. The overall form suggests a human figure in a skirt or robe; the smaller boulder representing the head. The larger lower stone has been whitewashed in the past and has given rise to its more frequently used name of the White Wife. A concrete base has been added to the stone in recent times to provide greater stability.



The (not-so white) White Wife

### **Cloughorr** (SMR code – ANT-006-010)

This stone, in the townland of the same name, is approximately 1.35 m in height, stands at 60 m above sea level and is 2.25 km southeast of Portrush. Several vertical grooves and some small depressions occur on the stone but these are probably natural weathering features rather than the decorative work of those who erected it. The monument occupies a commanding position on the north side of Ballymacrea Road and again provides extensive views over the coast.



The west-face of Cloughorr, showing prominent grooves at upper left



When seen from certain directions the stone seems to crown the top of an artificial mound with a diameter of about 40 m, but there is no information as to what this mound represents. The name Cloughorr has been interpreted by some to mean 'stone of gold' (*Cloch Óir*) while others have suggested 'pointed, prominent stone' (*Cloch Chorr*). But 'pointed' it is not!



View across Portrush from Cloughorr.

Archaeologists have attributed many of the numerous standing stones that survive in the landscape to the Early Bronze Age – between 4000 and 3500 years ago. Excavations have determined that some are associated with burials and they may therefore represent grave markers. Other stones may have been set up as route-way or boundary indicators, or to denote places that were regarded as in some way special by pre-historic communities – the same structure may have served different purposes. It is also known that some standing stones are considerably more modern, having been erected by farmers as cattle scratching posts!

In the case of the two stones described above, it is tempting to suggest an association with the Middle Bronze Age village of Corrstown, dated to 3550-3150 years ago. Each stone is situated approximately the same distance (1.5 km) from Corrstown, and a straight line from one stone to the other passes across the southern half of the village site. This straight line trends east-northeast - west-southwest. Its significance, if any, is not known but the archaeological excavation of Corrstown recorded three rows of house structures in the southern half of the site on a similar alignment.



Whether the standing stones were raised by the inhabitants of Corrstown or by those who had gone before or those who came later may never be known, but speculation often drives investigation. And while that thought is current, could the stones have had any astronomical significance for the Bronze Age residents of Corrstown? Both stones give uninterrupted views towards the positions of the setting sun in mid-summer and mid-winter.

If the stones could only speak!

**Note** – both standing stones are in productive farmland and permission should be sought from the respective landowners before visiting.

Our thanks to Peter for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters.

28<sup>th</sup> November 2020